# REVIEW SECTION

## SMALL GROUP PROCESS: LEARNING FROM WOMEN

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**Synopsis**—The small group is the primary process and structure of the international feminist movement. However, traditional academic researchers have shown little interest in female groups, apparently considering them subordinate or marginal to men's groups. Women are beginning to examine women's groups and their findings call into question the traditional models of group dynamics. This is a review of information compiled from a variety of sources ranging from personal accounts to empirical studies. Through pooling the knowledge and insights gained from these records and studies we hope to further the development of feminist group process and point the way for future study.

### INTRODUCTION

We first look at the interaction in the early feminist groups—especially the consciousness raising (CR) groups—since the concepts of participatory democracy, equality, and co-operation developed in the CR groups have had a major influence on the entire social structure of the women's movement in the U.S. Second, we review some of the difficulties many feminists have experienced when trying to apply the values, assumptions and experiences of CR groups to other types of feminist groups, and when trying to organize large regional or national campaign groups. Third, we take a critical look at research on sex differences in small group communication with a view toward new interpretations and approaches. Finally, we offer one theoretical model for understanding the origins of the differences in female and male interaction patterns.

Before taking up these topics, however, it is important that several limitations of this study be recognized. Much of the material concerning the description and evaluation of the small groups is unavailable to us. Much of what has been written about the small groups in the women's movement has had a very limited circulation. And the literature of the movement is, for the most part, still uncatalogued. We imposed a further restriction, by limiting our discussion to the issues concerning small groups within the younger branch of the movement, omitting specific discussion of the more hierarchical structure of the National Organization for Women (NOW). (See Sonja Foss, 1976 for a brief account of the radical feminists' break from NOW.) Our use of 'women's movement' in this paper refers, then, only to one (albeit important) segment of the movement in the United States. Our limited reading and experience of the movement in Great Britain has shown us that the political and other cultural institutions of a country and the political affiliations of the women in the movement will contribute to determining the questions posed and the types of analysis

conducted on small group interaction. We would like to hear from others, in the United States and other countries, who have tried to identify the qualities of feminists' small group interactions.

## CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING GROUPS

*Origins of the CR group*

Historians have organized the groups of the women's liberation movement under several categories; for example, radical, revolutionary, Marxist, reformist, liberal, cultural, and socialist are some of the labels which have been used to define the orientations of the women involved. (For discussions of the types of segments and their corresponding philosophies see Elizabeth Diggs, 1971; Jo Freeman, 1975; Kyriakos Kontopoulous, 1972; Bonnie Kreps, 1972; Louise McPherson, 1973; Juliet Mitchell, 1973; Robin Morgan, 1970.)

In each analysis the historians have seen the small group as the basic unit of organization. Some of the groups have a formalized organizational structure. However, one of the most common forms of organization has been the consciousness raising group, based on strict egalitarian principles which include a rejection of an authority or leadership role. Within these groups there is explicit rejection of traditional modes of discussion and decision-making. The principles discussed in the groups illustrate the concerns of feminists as they evaluate male models for small group interaction and as they consider the experience and needs of the individual women involved as well as the goals of the movement.

Contemporary sources disagree on the exact beginnings of the CR groups. In her history of the early years of the movement Maren Lockwood Carden (1974) says the CR groups began perhaps in 1966 or 1967, certainly by 1968. Many of the women who had been involved with various radical groups started holding rap sessions that year. The group organized under the title New York Radical Women started to meet regularly to talk not only about racial problems in this country and Vietnam, but gradually about their own problems as women. Several of the women who had worked on civil rights causes in the South remembered the revival type meetings at which blacks testified about their suffering caused by 'the Man'. The women realized that they could also testify about *their* suffering caused by the men. And members of the group recalled that Mao Tse-Tung had promoted 'Speak Bitterness' meetings to raise women's political consciousness in North China during the late 1940s (Claudia Dreifus, 1973:2, 5; Susan Brownmiller, 1970:141–145).

In retrospect, it is possible to note other circumstances that led to the beginnings of CR groups and their particular structure. Some of the women who first became interested in CR groups had already had their consciousness raised in one respect. Their involvement in the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement had already required some consideration of the structure of our society. These women were in opposition to some of the traditional values of at least a sizable segment of our society. They were working along with men, attempting to force the changes in laws and ways of the society. Yet, as the remarks and actions of many of the revolutionary men made so clear (the tenor of Stokeley Carmichael's remark, 'The position of women in our movement should be prone', was repeated often), these women were denied some of their own rights because of traditional sexist values that had not been widely debated for many years in the United States.

The literature of the movement provides us with a definition of the CR groups: the people involved, the perceived importance of the groups to the members and to the movement, the explicit rules and basic tenets of organization and procedure, and the perceived process of

many of the groups. The women in CR groups have participated in a group structure and process which differ in fundamental ways from traditional group process as that is explained and encouraged by most institutions in our society.

### Description of CR groups

While by anyone's estimate many thousands of women of various ages from different jobs, backgrounds, and geographical locations have been involved in CR groups, the membership has been fairly homogeneous in several respects. In her 1974 report on CR and other feminist groups, Carden stated that the great majority were middle-class and white. In this paper, we are focusing on literature which is descriptive of this majority and on the traditional academic approaches to small group research and theory; we recognize that we have a great deal more to learn about the small group process from many sources not often cited in the literature, including Third World women and working class women of all races.[1]

In the early days of the movement a number of journals referred to the importance of the particular small group structure which was evolving. In a 1969 essay in *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, Peggy White and Starr Goode argued that since 'the organization we build *is* the society our revolution will create' internal democracy is vital in effectively combating prevalent social forces. They write:

> Small groups are intrinsic to this kind of democracy. We contend that there is a funda-
> mental difference in consciousness between the woman who is not part of a well-func-
> tioning small group and one who is . . . and that the small group is the agency of this
> change. (56)

Further, the small group has been seen as a close-knit network of women who can provide ready support to each other as they go through a reassessment of experience, often a stressful procedure (Paula Costa Eastman, 1973). (In this respect the norms of the CR groups—the rejection of confrontation or dispute with others—differ in a fundamental way from those of 'encounter' groups.)

The small group was thought to discourage competition, aggression, and the establishment of a status hierarchy while encouraging trust, cooperation, collective consciousness, yet independency on the part of members. The small group has been the unit of organization for many types of movement activities but participation in the CR or rap groups became

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[1] For example, black women have been members along with white women in some CR groups and black women have organized some all-black CR groups. F. Kennedy (cited in *Time*, March 26, 1973, p. 63) has suggested that blacks are more likely to be concerned with economic deprivation than with CR groups. Others have suggested that black women are more likely to have kin and friendship support networks which provide functions similar to those of the CR group. What is without question is that while women's groups in general have been treated as 'marginal' to male culture (both middle and working class), black women's groups and white working class women's groups have been nearly invisible to all but their members. A great deal of the expressive repertoire, the ritual, the structure of our society has been overlooked. Just as women's activities have been ignored by men when generalizations about people's activities are made, the danger is real that class and race differences will be considered minimal and marginal when women's groups are discussed, or these differences will be defined by those who have little knowledge of the differences. One (white) critic writes of the comparison white women make of their problems and the problems of blacks: '(the analogy) perpetuates the depressing habit white people have of first defining the black experience and then of making it their own. Intellectually sloppy, it implies that both blacks and white women can be seriously discussed as amorphous, classless, blobby masses' (Catherine Stimpson, 1971).

the most prevalent activity of women in the movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the development of the norms for those groups have had a major impact on all feminist groups. The CR group has been called the 'cornerstone' (Sappho Collective, 1971), 'the heart and soul' (*Ms.*, July 1972, p. 18) and 'a mainstay' (Edith Folb, 1978) of the movement.

Freeman (1975:117) writes that once the movement outgrew the Left there were no established structures for interaction for the women who were challenging some basic assumptions of many institutions. The structure of the CR groups became itself a major topic of discussion. Many groups experimented with 'rules' for organization—conscious that the CR groups were themselves agents for social change.

### Guidelines for CR groups

Guidelines to consciousness-raising were published in many of the early publications, often prefaced by a statement of the types of groups which are not CR: social, action, business, encounter, therapy, religious, political. Most of the publications recognize consciousness-raising as one step in a process which involves education and, later, action. The definitions in the various publications can perhaps be summarized thus: Consciousness-raising is a process of education which enables women to develop a consciousness, an awareness, of their relationship to other women and to a patriarchal society that oppresses women. This is accomplished best, almost all publications agree, through intimate, supportive rap sessions of small groups of 8 to 15 women who meet regularly over a period of months.

Having rules for such groups seems in some ways paradoxical since the groups are designed to provide a new freedom for the women involved. This paradox is certainly recognized by the writers and publishers of the rules. The 'rules' are usually called guidelines.

The model for CR which was evidently used by most groups (Dreifus, 1973:17) is the guide published in the first regular issue of *Ms.* (July 1972). The article lists no author and indicates that the guidelines summarized the experiences of women in a number of groups. Several of the publications make it clear that the guidelines should be subject to revision.

The 'rules' include concern with the very areas of group structure and interaction of our culture which the movement is reassessing: what constitutes 'proof', what constitutes appropriate behavior toward others, and what topics are appropriate for group discussion. Emotionality is seen as a valued human quality. Personal testimony, rather than 'objective' information, is to be the content of the discussion. CR groups 'by definition are leaderless' (Esther Newton and Shirley Walton, 1971). Confrontation is to be avoided as women are encouraged to share honestly and to consider the needs and interests of others. By various techniques, for example by using speaking-time tokens or by beginning sessions by going around the circle so that everyone responds to a question or comments, members are to share experiences and to share rights to the group's attention. Possible topics are often included in the guidelines since women in the movement are suggesting that what has been considered taboo or unimportant are often the most important topics for women to consider as they analyze inequities and as they redefine themselves. Many of the topics included in the guidelines are violence, contraception and abortion, aging, menopause, relationship with parents, relationships with other women, street and office hassling, expectations made of women by other women and by men, and feelings about physical changes. These have, of course, been topics of conversation between intimate friends in the past. However, in the CR groups the topics are seen not as mundane, or peripheral or secondary to men's concerns, but as important to a reevaluation of women and their concerns.

*Interaction patterns in CR groups*

Consciousness-raising has been considered 'not only the forum for exploring these questions, but also the vehicle for practicing the answers' [Editorial in *Women: A Journal of Liberation* (Summer 1971)]. One woman, describing the often exhilarating interaction in CR groups, mentions that part of the enjoyment comes from the chance to 'live an alien life style' (Letty Cottin Pogrebin, 1973:80–81). She, like many others, thinks the process of the CR groups differs in several important respects from that of most other discussion groups. Undoubtedly, the actuality of CR groups will not always match the model which the members describe. However, the women involved in these groups are saying that institutions are not unalterable or self-evident, and that the traditional model of small group interaction is inadequate to describe what is happening in the feminist groups or to describe what a 'satisfactory' group should be.

Most of the traditional literature in small group discussion makes several assumptions. Group goal achievement is of primary importance, members' satisfaction is secondary. Decisions should be based upon reliable facts arrived at through information sharing and logical analysis. Members should strive to reach agreement through debate (the assumption being that group interaction will involve conflict or opposition). An effective group provides optimum conditions for leadership development (Babette Copper *et al.*, 1974; see for example, Martin Andersen, 1974).

The interaction in CR groups poses a contrast to this traditional concern with maximum productivity, 'objective' facts, and competition. Members' satisfaction is of primary importance. Emotion and personal experience and group accumulative logic are highly valued while generalizations and 'linear logic' are not as highly valued. Cooperation is stressed while competition is discouraged (Copper *et al.*, 1974).

A 1970 essay from a women's collective reports the problem the group had initially with following 'a very "male" pattern of relating to each other'—vying with each other for individual attention. They wrote:

> A new concept of relating to each other began to emerge from our reflections. Figuratively, it looked like this. We thought about all of us sitting around a big brown crockery pot (our collective identity—experiences, thoughts, ideas) and each of us throwing in all of the thoughts . . . we wanted to share with the group. As we threw them in, we'd stir them up and many of the ideas took on new shape and meaning. . . . Since we have begun throwing things into our crock, we have not noticed ourselves competing with each other (well, sometimes . . .). We have begun to think of our ideas as gifts to the group—to all of us. They can't possibly make any of us lesser but can only make all of us stronger. ('A continuation . . .' 1970, p. 9)

In discussing the sequence of discourse in CR groups, a number of writers have referred to the frequent use of anecdotes. Copper *et al.*, 1974 write that anecdotal material is used to clarify, to support or embroider what others have said, to reassure, and to paraphrase. They recognize that storytelling is used also in traditional discussion but suggest,

> In a competitive format, a narrative often has a manipulation purpose. The opening joke or name-dropping story are familiar examples of this. There is often a subtle and highly fluid rivalry taking place around attention, prestige, ability to amuse, or the use of group time. Story-telling is impersonal, with approval depending upon skill in techniques of performance. . . . The use of personal experience to develop a concept is perceived as

'gossipy', an inappropriate use of emotion in the context of an intellectual discussion. (n.p.)

Although the narratives of men have been studied, there is no comparable work on women's narrative. Susan Kalčik (1975) has made a start with her study of CR groups. She found that the telling of personal narratives was one of the 'significant strategies that the women applied to all group interactions' (4). One recurrent narrative type she calls the kernel story, which she describes as a reference to the action, the subject, or the dialogue from a longer story. The structure of the kernel story is flexible; sometimes, depending upon the expressed interest of the rest of the group, the narrator may give just a brief introduction and the kernel itself. The structure of the story is determined by the participants' relations to it, by their reactions to its introduction, and by the elements which are considered the most meaningful to the group. These stories become part of the repertoire of the group, referenced and even retold by other members, used at times to support other stories with similar themes. Narrative in the CR groups is, then, often conversational, a group activity. Kalčik writes:

One might conjecture that the structure of such stories parallels the rhythm of many women's lives, filled as they are with small tasks and constant interruptions from children, husbands, telephones, repairmen. It is common in our culture that men and women do not value women's speech or stories. . . . That women have thus learned to be brief and apologetic in their speech unless encouraged seems to be reflected in the story structure I have described. (11)

She reports that other common speech strategies used in the CR groups are filling in, tieing together, and serializing. Many phrases or sentences are left unfinished by the speakers; often a few words are enough to refer to experiences shared by all. The gaps are left to be filled in silently or out loud by others. New subjects or stories are usually preceded by transitions, illustrating the connections to the rest of the discussion. These strategies seem to be more characteristic (although not unique) to feminist groups, and perhaps to women's groups in general.

## DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST ACTION GROUPS

Many, evidently most, feminists thought the small group form of organization we have described was appropriate for their needs in the first years of the movement. [Or some fraction of those years. A publication entitled 'An Introduction to the New York Radical Feminists' (n.d.) suggests that the consciousness-raising activities of a group should continue for a minimum of 3 months to be followed by reading and discussion of movement literature.] Women were meeting with the explicit purpose of breaking down their isolation from other women and of reconsidering their political, economic, and social position in relation to that of men. The norms worked out for CR groups seemed ideal for these meetings.

From the beginning of the movement there was some disagreement over 'the leadership issue'. However, the independent small groups were seen by most as a necessary (if limited) structure in the first step of breaking down the isolation between women. The groups were considered the most reasonable structure for collective trust (Pam Allen, 1969), and for providing support for women who were redefining themselves (Diggs, 1971). No cohesive body of principles or feminist ideology had been developed [although certainly many

groups—for example, The (New York) Feminists—believed in the need for a theoretical analysis of the problems of women (Foss, 1976)], and no great need was seen for much national cooperation. Most feminists were opposed to the type of large institutions associated with male hierarchy; the small group seemed a refuge from the bureaucratic world, a space (in the terminology of the movement) for questioning the male values while experiencing freedom from censorship (Pamela Kearon, 1969). The small group allowed women to work without having to compromise beliefs 'to meet the approval of some mass organization' ('Developing Our Theory and Our Practice', 1971).

The conditions and concerns of many feminists changed during the initial years after the first CR groups formed. Many new types of groups were organized and the structure of the CR groups did not always seem adequate to deal with the goals of the new groups. More than personal solutions were needed by the various women's studies committees, work collectives, study and writing groups, labor unions, and women's centers. In the name of equality, the activities in these groups often tended to be sporadic and haphazard. Concern with creating a non-hierarchical structure sometimes meant that there was no overall strategy for achieving action-oriented goals (Radical Feminists, 1972:28). The small group structure which works well for consciousness raising was found not always to work so well for other types of groups.

What was perceived as unity in the CR groups was seen as authoritarianism—the controlling and stifling of dissent—by some, especially by Third World women (Judy Cohen, 1975; Frances Earl Kimber, 1976). Groups differed on the desirability of confrontation (Deborah Rosenfelt, 1973). Many women, while enjoying the advantages of the small group, also realized that many groups were duplicating efforts. The autonomy of the groups also meant that women of one group could not readily learn from the experiences of women in other groups (DC Conference Committee, 1971). Women were still in one sense isolated in these groups, segregated from other women in other groups (Helena Streijffert, 1974).

A reporter from the Seattle Radical Women summarized the thinking of many (but certainly not all) feminists when she wrote of the need for theory and program.

> The affinity-group character of a woman's liberation organization should be a result and effect of its primarily political nature, rather than its central raison d'existence. All the sympathy and empathy and sexual solidarity in the world cannot together substitute for a clear-headed ideological understanding of the causes of oppression and the psychological reflex within ourselves. 'Friendship is friendship, but politics is politics', says an old Russian proverb—and program is decisive in summoning our powers of resistance, coping, and changing. (Clara Fraser, 1970:55)

Many organizations have found that they need to work out a structure specific to their particular needs. [A woman from a feminist newspaper guild voiced her concern about her group, saying, 'We are not going to organize the unorganized until we organize the organized' (reported in 'CLUW', 1974)]. Often this structure is some modification of the structure of the CR groups. For example, women involved in women's studies programs are aware that the way material is presented has as much to do with a critique of the present authority systems as what is presented. One woman reporting on experiences (hers and others) with using CR techniques in classes wrote, 'These definitely don't work. Students want you to tell them something; they don't want to be honest before you are well-tested' (Marilyn Webb, 1973:37). Yet she believes that, 'When we teach about sexual politics, it's class hierarchy we are attacking. If we recreate this same division within our teaching, our ideas

are devoid of form' (36). She considers the problem of matching content to teaching style unsolved: ' "Beneficient leader" is the best I've been able to come up with' (37).

The style of individual teachers, whatever their political views, varies greatly, of course. However, Rosenfelt (1974) writes that through the diversity of approaches used by women's studies teachers can be seen some commonalities:

> Few are simply lecture courses: time and again, the emphasis is on student participation, student responsibility—sometimes for selection and organization of materials, sometimes for reports, panels, project presentations, often for discussion or work in small groups. This emphasis no doubt reflects the connection of women's studies with the women's movement at large—its dislike of authoritarian techniques, but more, its sense that each woman is, at least potentially, an intelligent, productive, responsible being. . . . (11)

She adds that at least part of the work in most of these courses is group oriented; individual competition for grades is discouraged and cooperative participation is encouraged (11).

*Leadership and structure*

As we have already indicated, leadership and structure have been key issues in the feminist movement since its inception. As goals have evolved so have concepts of leadership and form. Small groups began with the basic premise of equality. When the focus of groups shifted from consciousness raising to action, these concepts were called into question.

The goal of total equality can be seen to have several advantages for political groups. The competency of all members is maximized leading to a more effective and productive group (Eastman, 1973). The movement cannot be destroyed by the destruction of a few ('Dangers in the Pro-Women Line and Consciousness Raising' n.d.). Feminist principles are put into practice, so that experience reinforces theory.

There are, however, some obvious barriers to equality, such as race and class that have been discussed in feminist literature (see footnote 1). Barbara Mehrhof (1969, 1970) presents the view that while women constitute a class inferior to men, there is an implicit hierarchy among women based on the status of the males with whom they are associated. This secondary class system must be recognized in order to prevent the development of a female hierarchy which would put some women in a position to oppress other women. Much discussion has centered on this issue, as well as on the argument that the movement excludes women who are not white, middle class.

As the movement expanded and gained attention, it became clear that not designating leadership or structure did not mean that none existed. On a national level, the media created leaders out of a few women who spoke or wrote about feminist concerns (see for example, Charlotte Bunch and Beverly Fisher, 1976). Feminists, confronted with this contradiction, sometimes responded by denouncing 'stars' whom they did not see as representing them or their views. This conflict also arose at the local level within small groups. Women are encouraged to develop themselves, yet individual achievement has sometimes been criticized as self-serving. As a result, women have left the movement bitter and disappointed (Anselma dell'Olio n.d.).

Freeman's 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' (1972–1973) has become a classic critique of the means by which equality was sought—the supposedly leaderless, structureless CR group. She maintains that a group always has a structure whether implicit or explicit. If it is implicit, that is, if leadership emerges informally, it is more difficult for the group to exercise

control over the covert leaders or alter the structure. If leadership and structure are explicit, that is discussed openly and designated by the group, then leaders are responsible to the group. This approach is more equalitarian and more functional for group action. Charlotte Bunch (Bunch and Fisher, 1976) offers a similar analysis concluding that structurelessness can have the reverse effect than that which was desired, i.e., some women might be excluded from the movement and those within segregated into cliques.

From this type of analysis and further group experience, the concept of rotating or horizontal leadership arose. On an informal, implicit level, this type of leadership was probably functioning all along, but without the recognition and control of the group. Elizabeth Aries' study (1976) which is described in a later section on sex differences in group communication, indicates that groups of all women tend to shift leadership rather than having a fixed dominance order which is characteristic of all male groups. For example, a woman may dominate one session by talking a lot. During the next session, she may apologize for taking up too much of the group's time and encourage participation from more silent members.

The concept of rotating leadership, then, was made explicit, formalized and adapted to the needs of action groups. This type of leadership allows for the development of a collective structure which is more horizontal and flexible than hierarchical organizational models. Reports of feminist collectives are found throughout the literature. Many of them describe a common evolution from no explicit leadership or structure to a division of responsibility and formalization of structure. The Center for Women's Studies and Services at San Diego State University (Joyce Nower and Carol Rowell, 1972) illustrates this process. Responsibility is delegated by the general body to subgroups specializing in a task area. The subgroups report to the general membership meetings where major decisions are made and policy is formulated. Responsibility for facilitating or chairing these general meetings is often rotated. Efforts may be co-ordinated by individuals in designated positions and or by a steering committee with the understanding that responsibility will be redistributed at regular intervals.

This structural framework is quite common to all types of collectives and is not exclusively found in the Women's Liberation Movement. Feminist principles, as well as the patterns of female interaction in groups, however, provide a strong base for this mode of task organization. Success is measured in terms of process, as well as results ('Report to our readers', 1976) so that the likelihood of carrying out these stated principles is increased. United States women involved in Leftist political organizations long argued that what was said to be a collective really contained a male dominated hierarchical structure. We believe this is less likely to be true of any feminist group because the members are conscious of their own process and because women do not tend to arrange themselves into vertical dominance orders as frequently as men do (Aries, 1976; Eleanor Emmons Maccoby and Carol Nagy Jacklin, 1974:263, 265).

*Formation of larger groups*

The small group structure of the movement seems especially limited when people want to deal with regional or national issues or when individuals or groups want to make national or international contacts with others in the movement. In their report of their efforts at planning an international conference, the DC Conference Committee (1971) wrote:

We lack understanding of collectivity and the collective process. When we began planning

the conference we assumed that the process would be collective on every level. We ignored the difficulty people had in putting that assumption into practice. (56)

The Committee acknowledges that proliferation of small autonomous groups may facilitate movement growth in other areas, but the writers of the report conclude that 'we should be realistic about the kinds of things the movement can do well given its present lack of structure: a conference of the type we envisioned is obviously not one of them' (56).

This concern is repeated by many others. A report in *Big Mama Rag* of the 1975 Feminist Economic Conference details the difficulty representatives from many feminist credit unions had in trying to form a national Feminist Economic Network. As the reporter noted,

> Dealing on a national, and an international level, requires the development of organizational skills that are unfamiliar to many women. But our small group experiences, because they are based on limited project-building around concepts of personality, individual self-development, local needs and loyalties, do not necessarily apply to building a mass movement. (Jackie St. Joan, 1976)

Organizers of national or international feminist conferences aware of these problems have tried several plans to facilitate the discussions of the participants. For example, the International Socialist–Feminist Conference held in Amsterdam in 1977 was deliberately kept small so that participants would not be faced with working with huge numbers. [One reporter comments, 'However, a certain unease was generated by some by this unusual and seemingly quasi-elitist move!' [('Amsterdam', 1977).] The planning group of the 1977 National Women's Liberation Conference in London tried to provide before the final plenary session a framework for discussion by setting forth a printed 'Proposal Procedure for Mass Meeting'. The proposed procedures themselves were put to an early meeting of the conference for approval or revisions by participants.

The review of that conference in (British) *Women's Report* includes this statement:

> ... it is apparent that the Women's Liberation Movement is not a fixed entity but a totality of various autonomous groups and individuals. We cannot draw up a blueprint for liberation—we attack oppression on numerous levels, individually and collectively. Searching for a common strategy is an understandable desire, but is unrealistic and contributes to the appearance of uneasy factions. ('Reflections on Our Revolution', 1977:3)

The 'solutions' suggested in that review essay are that the various groups in the movement should keep in contact with each other and that the groups should consider consciousness-raising a continuing activity of all groups in order to work toward understanding of the divisions within the movement. Freeman is another critic of efforts to provide a broadly based uniform movement, writing that 'historically, American movements have thrived best when they were highly pluralistic' (1975:151).

However, Carol Rowell (1973), in discussing attempts to reorganize and rebuild the movement, writes that women who are planning activities involving large numbers of feminists are finding it possible to combine an awareness of 'feminist culture' with clear plans emphasizing concrete issues. She feels that too many attempts at cooperative work between groups have failed because of avoidance of detail and direction, lack of self-discipline, and fear of leadership.

### SEX DIFFERENCES IN SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION

Our exploration of the literature on consciousness raising groups was initiated in part because of a dissatisfaction with the way in which small group research has dealt with the experiences of women in groups. Because the communication behavior of women has not generally conformed to male models, women have either been excluded from studies or analyzed in terms of how they differ from men. This later viewpoint has led to small group research on sex differences. It is not our intent here to review this research, but to indicate fundamental problems with this general approach. Our aim is to highlight areas of our concern and to offer alternative approaches.

General criticisms of the methodology of small group research are also applicable to the study of sex differences. Of particular concern are the definition of a small group, the dimensions of measurement and the context for study. A sampling of studies on sex differences indicates that typically the small group in academic research is composed of from 2 to 20 members usually drawn from a white middle class university setting and brought together under laboratory conditions, often for only one session. There are many social scientists who would question whether these are groups at all. Perhaps we are looking at encounters between aggregates of strangers. Measurements of results from a single session do not afford adequate opportunity to evaluate group process over time. Thus, analysis tends to focus on discrete outcomes rather than patterns of communication. There is a general lack of regard for context and external influences: frequently results are compared without considering the effect of different test conditions; laboratory settings lack the larger ambient context of natural small groups; and the impact of external social roles on communication behavior is not thoroughly taken into account. Finally, the models used to construct experiments and interpret results are often mechanistic and rule based. They fail to acknowledge humans 'as rational actors oriented toward communicative goals and employing strategies to achieve those goals' (Penelope Brown, 1976).

*Sex differences vs. sex bias*

The first question to be asked is what is meant by sex differences? Is any difference between men and women in communication behavior which may occur at specified times under specified conditions to be considered characteristic? If these differences seem to reflect gender role expectations, then what are the underlying factors which produce these expectations and how do they vary? Are we measuring differences between the sexes or comparing males and females to a male standard? In the context of society can measures of differences be value free?

John E. Baird, Jr. (1976) reviewed the literature on sex differences in group communication from 1950 to 1975. He organized the studies he found into five general categories: interaction patterns, task performance, conformity, bargaining and coalition formation, and leadership. Baird states that while this research generally supports sex role expectations, in the latter three categories gender seems to interact with a complex of variables; results have not been consistent across a variety of test situations. For example, females do not always conform more than males, but are more likely to do so on male issues and in mixed sex groups (186–187).

Several critiques of sex bias in sex difference research have been offered which can also be applied to research on sex differences in small groups (e.g., Jessie Bernard, 1976; Berit Ås, 1975; Olga Eizner Favreau, 1977; and Naomi Weisstein, 1971). The most obvious criticism

is that research on sex differences has told us nothing about sex similarities. No attempt has been made to identify and categorize behavior which is not differentiated on the basis of sex. Favreau points out that sex bias can occur at various stages in research on sex differences: formulation of the problem; operationalizing of the problem into experimental procedures; performance of the experiment; analysis, interpretation and generalization of the results; and citing of research findings in other articles and reviews.

The concept of male superiority is a pervasive one which affects all levels of research, but particularly the formulation of the problem and the interpretation of the results. For example, greater problem solving ability is generally attributed to men. Favreau (1977), however, argues that the scope of problem solving tasks has been limited to areas in which men do well, such as mathematical and spatial relationships and has excluded areas where women do well, such as linguistic proficiency. The spheres of linguistic and inter-personal communication abilities are not seen as problem solving areas, although every inter-personal communication situation could be seen in a problem–solution format. That is, how do I communicate effectively with this person in this situation? How do I determine what she is thinking and feeling and how she will respond to what I am saying?

If women exhibit greater proficiency at some communication tasks, why then don't they perform more effectively than men in group problem solving situations regardless of the topic? Two influencing factors might be the feminine role model which inhibits leadership in mixed groups (for example, see Edwin Megargee, 1969) and the competitive male mode of group interaction which contradicts the female goal of a fair outcome and tends to emphasize the sociality side of women's leadership ability.

In considering leadership, it appears that in laboratory situations the feminine stereotype may impede women from assuming the male model of leadership and, thus, they are not seen as demonstrating leadership qualities. In one naturalistic study (reported in Baird, 1976: 191) of women who did attain leadership, however, they were judged to be more competent than men. Thus, what we may be measuring here is differences in leadership style, rather than differences in leadership ability. Arlene Eskilson and Mary Glen Wiley (1976) confirm the finding that women who attain leadership exhibit less recognizable task leadership behavior than men (i.e. male defined leadership behavior) while at the same time showing more expressive social leadership.

In terms of modes of interaction, it is likely that men and women have developed different strategies for behavior based on the existence of social expectations and that each should be viewed in terms of effectiveness given the context, expectations and goals. For example, Baird reports a study which indicates that men are more interested in winning and that women are more interested in a fair outcome (188). If our goals are different, it would follow that our behavior would be different because of these goals not because of sex *per se*.

It seems to be a mistake to assume that men and women consistently use the same strategies; rather, as Paula B. Johnson and Jacqueline Goodchilds (1976) show, strategy is likely to interact with gender and situational expectations. They found that both men and women report using direct 'masculine' strategies when fulfilling their traditional role expectations, but when they wished to contradict these roles they used indirect or 'feminine' strategies. Thus, when women seek leadership, which is typically thought of as a masculine trait, they use indirect means because it counters expectations, while men may pursue leadership directly.

Thus, we might contend that men have defined the games women are supposed to play by

men's rules and judged women's behavior accordingly. That is, men make up the theory and the test situations based on their experience and evaluate the behavior of women by their standards. The fact that women often behave differently in same sex groups, then, seems like an interesting curiosity rather than an indication of different modes of conduct based on different experiences and different ways of defining the situations.

We can illustrate this point by applying exchange theory to feminist consciousness raising groups. This theory posits that social behavior is based on an exchange of goods, whether material or non-material. The person's aim is to influence others so that as much is received as is given. An exponent of this theory, Blau (1964) states that the functions of social exchange are to establish bonds of friendship and to establish superordination over others. The latter portion of this statement is in direct contradiction with the stated goals of CR groups. Again, this is not to say that the goals of equality are always met, but that there is explicit effort to avoid this type of interaction. CR groups offer unique opportunities for study of long term interaction patterns in self-initiated, closely bonded groups. Kalčik's (1975) paper on personal narrative in women's rap groups previously mentioned describes the strategies women use and a distinct brand of story telling—the kernel story. Here again we are led to the conclusion that women's life histories produce unique patterns of communication, which must be evaluated in their own context. Women appear to have their own rules of speech and interaction which need to be studied with an openness toward the formulation of new theories.

*New approaches*

New approaches to exploring the ways men and women communicate in groups are developing which attempt to deal with many of the concerns we have expressed about sex difference research. Studies included in this section are examples of research which concentrates on studying group process over time and which looks beyond the laboratory for factors underlying apparent sex differences.

Clarice Stasz Stoll and Paul T. McFarlane (1973) emphasize the importance of considering the influence of external social roles on communication behavior in laboratory groups and how role expectations contradict or support the goals of the experimental situation. Previous research on sex roles in negotiating games indicates that players will maintain behavior consistent with their definitions of external game roles, even if such behavior is not rewarded by the game structure. Most simulation game experiments are set up so that an individual must compete to win. These types of test situations are congruent with male role expectations and, therefore, it is not surprising that men outperform women. In contrast, Stoll set up a game strategy experiment in which it was necessary to cooperate to win. This strategy is consistent with female role expectations, so it was predicted that over the course of a few sessions women would succeed more frequently than men. Results supported this hypothesis. Females showed increased rationality and/or cooperation over time while men did not. Thus, in evaluating the results of laboratory research we must be careful to analyze the test situation to see if male or female interaction patterns are favored.

Meeker and Weitzel-O'Neill's study (1977) supports earlier studies which show that male and female strategies are flexible depending on the situation and the operation of social expectations. She found that sex difference in task behavior is minimized when information is presented to indicate that females are at least as competent as males. She contends then that external gender roles influence behavior by 'affecting performance expectations and expectations of legitimacy of competition or dominating behavior' (101).

Aries (1976) studied the behavior of two all male groups, two all female groups and two mixed groups who met in five $1\frac{1}{2}$ hour sessions with the task of getting to know each other. Her study, in contrast to many previously cited by Baird and others, allowed for the development of a group over time, so that process variables could be observed. Thus, we could argue that here we are observing actual group formation rather than an aggregate of assembled individuals or subjects. Aries found differences in the communication behavior of men and women in same sex and mixed sex groups. Men behaved differently in same sex groups than they did in mixed sex groups and so did women although there was a less dramatic change in behavior for women.

In same sex groups men established a stable dominance order among speakers, while the leadership in all-female groups was much more flexible or rotating. In terms of content of conversation, men talked much less about themselves than women did in same sex groups Men were more likely to tell stories having the themes of aggressiveness and superiority, while women talked about their feelings and relationships with significant others. Men appeared to establish a sense of comraderie through story telling while women developed a sense of intimacy through self-revelation.

In mixed sex groups, men talked more about their feelings, while women talked less about home and family. Women spoke less in general in mixed sex groups and interacted less with each other than with men. Aries concludes that 'mixed group setting seems to benefit men more than women by allowing men more variation in their interpersonal style, while for women it brings more restrictions in style' (1976, 15).

In observing these groups over time Aries found that women tended to prefer all female groups and men tended to prefer the mixed group sessions. These results contradict Lionel Tigers' (1969) notion of male bonding and the male preference for all male groups. While we must be careful not to generalize these results to other contexts and tasks, it may well be that when the task is getting to know each other this preference and dynamic would hold.

Turning from the laboratory to everyday experience: numerous articles have appeared in popular magazines, especially for women, about the lack of communication between the sexes and what *women* can do about it. Commonly women complain that men will not talk with them about their feelings or even talk to them at all. This inexpressiveness has often been considered as a deficiency of many men due to their gender role socialization. Dana Densmore (1971) however, sees this lack of expressiveness on the part of males as a product rather than a problem of their gender role conditioning. Men don't communicate because they don't want to. Their goal, which here again may be winning rather than an equitable outcome, dictates an exploitive rather than accommodative strategy. Withholding information while someone else discloses facilitates dominance.

*Impact of feminism on the study and the dynamics of small groups*

Now that we have examined feminist group process as well as the literature on sex differences in small group communication, it seems appropriate to turn things around and look at the impact of feminism on not only the study of groups but the form and function of groups operating in society. A few current or soon to be published texts on small groups now include a chapter on consciousness raising groups (Samuel A. Culbert 1975, and Folb in press). However, Culbert regards consciousness raising groups as a product of the social movements of the sixties and does not even mention feminism. Folb's article in the forthcoming Cathcart and Semovar reader is based on her experience as a participant, leader and

trainer in CR groups. She provides a clear description of some aspects of CR group process. She contrasts the framework for development of a topic in this context with the way an informal group of friends might deal with similar material. In a CR group the aim is not only offering support, but exploring the political implications of the experiences of women.

While the inclusion of a chapter on CR groups in a general reader seems a step forward in providing information on the interaction of women, we caution against taking these groups out of the context of the movement and regarding them as just another type of small group. CR groups are self-initiated, long term, closely bonded groups which originated in response to societal conditions. CR groups have evolved into a variety of feminist groups which are continually changing in form and substance. These changes must also be recognized and will not appear in artificial settings.

Finally, we need to ask what impact has feminist group process had on the dynamics of other groups. Richard Mann's essay 'Winners, Losers and the Search For Equality in Groups' (1975) discusses the challenge that the women's liberation movement has presented to the machismo of the heroic style in and out of groups. While winning and losing may still dominate interaction in most mixed sex or all male groups, the mode of winning has changed. Obvious attempts at establishing superiority and dominance at the expense of others is no longer rewarded. He applies this statement to leftist political groups made up of white middle class males and females in the U.S. While these groups are the most likely to be affected by feminism, it would be difficult to claim an impact beyond the confines of the white middle class in specified circumstances. It is probably safe to assume that men's clubs are operating the same as usual.

We can only give brief mention here to the phenomenon of men's consciousness raising groups which are developing out of men's liberation and gay liberation. For example, Stan Levine (1974) and Jack Sawyer (1976) describe their experiences in these groups. The very existence of all male groups initiated for the purpose of exploring feelings, questioning social roles and the nature of intimacy between men itself demonstrates the impact of feminism, even if only a very small percentage of men participate in such groups.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to look at the development of consciousness raising groups to find new insights into group dynamics, and to examine and evaluate the research on sex differences in small groups with the aim of exposing biases and offering new approaches.

Jessie Bernard (1974) writes that feminists are calling attention 'to the sexist bias in our scientific paradigms that has had dysfunctional consequences not only for women but also for our society as a whole'.

The conflict model used in most traditional small group research does not provide the best framework for looking at the interaction of CR groups; in fact, it probably does not fit the interaction of many natural social groups. It could be argued that the dynamics of the CR groups is a result of the cathartic nature of the groups rather than a reflection of distinctive female patterns of communication. However, the materials we have gathered led us to reject this interpretation. We feel that the CR groups deserve particular attention for the following reasons: The CR group does not fit into any of the traditional classifications of groups. It is not primarily an affinity group (rewards of friendship the only goal), an interest group, a therapy group, or a task group. The CR group is a group in which members believe

that the group process decided upon has itself important implications for a social movement and for an entire culture. The members of the CR group—all of whom have had experiences in other groups—believe that the interaction is unique.

In reviewing our experience and the research findings on sex differences in small groups, we found that the following conclusions seem evident: women's experience is different from men's, they behave differently in groups and their behavior does not fit male models. But what does this mean? Ås (1975) sums up our concerns well. 'The questions which have been asked are if these differences are inborn or are learned. Very few have asked how such basic value differences have developed, and about the consequences of such differences if they truly exist' (145).

Jean Baker Miller (1976) offers some possible answers to these questions. The differences in the ways in which women and men communicate are central to gender role definitions which in turn affect the ego organization of males and females. A woman's ego is organized around serving others, while a man's ego is organized around self-interest. Women tend to translate their motivations into a means of serving others, while men tend to serve others on the basis of self-interest. While a woman's orientation towards the needs of others causes problems if it excludes recognition of her own needs, it also enables women to meet others' needs without necessarily seeing this as detracting from her own identity. Miller sees in this 'a path for more advanced development' (61) from the current societal mode which 'holds up narrow and ultimately destructive goals for the dominant group' (47) while denying what has been defined as women's sphere—i.e., the emotions, the daily physical maintenance of life and affiliative relationships.

Miller asserts that currently there is little opportunity to combine self-development and service to others. But we see that this is precisely what the women's liberation movement offers. This is the beginning of a social structure that is not built on the suppression of others. Rather than seeing the need for affiliation as a necessary evil or weakness in the individual's master plan for self-actualization, women see emotional relatedness as essential to satisfaction within any activity.

The question is how can women use their strengths which are not valued by the dominant society to effect substantial change? In a society that rewards winning how can we replace this goal with our own which would be the desire for a fair outcome?

As Miller clearly indicates, part of the answer is cooperative action. This perhaps best represents the current state of the feminist struggle. Small consciousness raising groups represented women's first attempts at cooperation specifically to meet their own needs. For some time now, women have been attempting larger cooperative efforts such as conferences, networks and larger permanent organization including federations and cooperatives developed along special interest lines. This clearly is the challenge: to take what we know out of the small groups setting, and apply our knowledge to the large social system as well.

The material we reviewed suggests we need to continue to revalue our experience and make it visible while instituting new social norms and changing societal goals to more accurately reflect our own. What we must avoid is continuing to do what we have always done. That is hold up the system and be co-opted by it. That is why it is essential for us to describe our own communication experience and put it into proper perspective. This essay is only the beginning of an attempt to bring together information and ideas on women's experience in small groups and to view this material in the context of our lives. It is only from this perspective that its true significance can be known.

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